Ongoing Investment in the Network

Centered on the needs of Comebackers - adults with some college but no degree - the Graduate! Network communities continue to expand their reach and deliver results. We are delighted to share here some of the memorable moments of this year, organized around the four Pillars of our work:

**Messaging:** The Graduate! Network communicates why it matters for adult students to complete their degrees for civic, economic, and personal benefits, and how talent strategies can achieve goals through adult degree (and credential) attainment. Read below about some of the people involved, and what the data show, and follow stories from printed and online media on our website.

**Partnership:** The Graduate! Network connects with existing partnerships to influence policies and practices within and between sectors, particularly higher education, employers and communities, in and across regions and states. All the Graduate! communities are at their core partnerships and we invite you to read more about them in their own words. In this edition we highlight three partnerships in particular. Two are focused on building new Graduate! communities: Tennessee Reconnect, which was funded by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission and Lumina Foundation, and Upgrade which was launched this past year by the San Antonio Education Partnership and funded by Trellis Foundation. In Trenton, Spokane, and across Kentucky, our Lumina-funded initiative Bridging The Talent Gap organized more than 1,900 employers to consider the implications of providing tuition benefits to their employees. See some of the results below.

**Practice:** For several years we have been diligently collecting data on the Comebackers served by Graduate! Network programs and partnerships. We know from our prior research that more than 80% of the Comebackers who returned to college with the help of a Graduate! advisor persist and more than half graduate within five years. We’re very proud of these outcomes, considering that these Comebackers had given up on ever completing college until they decided to give the Graduate! approach a try. This year, we completed a two-year study, funded by Trellis Foundation, to understand who are the Comebackers who re-enroll in college, and what practices help predict their enrollment. Read more about our findings under Data That Move Us.

**Sustainability:** As a national consortium of support for adult college success, we align and invest in research and design that support our communities. Each Graduate! community develops its own path to sustainability, based on local resources and advice from peers. We are immensely grateful to all the funders who have just started or continue to support our collective work.

We hope you enjoy reading these synopses of our work and are inspired by them as we are. We appreciate feedback and are always ready to answer questions. You can reach us at info@graduate-network.org.
In Case You Missed It: Takeaways from LearnX17

On October 19th and 20th, representatives from all Graduate! Communities, stakeholders, and experts convened at Bridges conference center in Memphis, Tennessee to share their recent and impactful learnings. We were honored to have the Mayor of Memphis, Jim Strickland give opening remarks. Check out more pictures from the event on our Facebook page and read tweets at #LearnX17.

"If every TN high school graduate goes to college and gets a degree we still won’t reach the Drive to 55 goal. We need to include adult learners." ~ Jessica Gibson, Assistant Executive Director, Adult Learner Initiatives, Tennessee Higher Education Commission

"The decisions made on the academic end are developed inside the walls of the university. We need to be making the decision within the community." ~ Paul Bolton, Director of Adult Enrollment, Spalding University

"Debt can be a hard stopping point for returning adults. Getting transcripts from schools that don’t exist anymore: schools that only have transcripts on paper.” ~ Beth Tankersley-Bankhead, Executive Director, RC Scholars

"There are too many “best kept secrets” for adults: The actual cost of college versus sticker price, that advising services exist, that tutoring doesn’t have to cost anything. We need to make public the best kept secrets.” ~ Sara Lundquist, Strategy Consultant, Lumina Foundation

Left to Right: David Williams, President/CEO of Leadership Memphis; The Honorable Jim Strickland, Mayor of Memphis; Jessica Gibson, Assistant Executive Director for Adult Learner Initiatives, Tennessee Higher Education Commission; Hadass Sheffer, President of The Graduate! Network

“The issue isn’t that students aren’t college ready, it’s that colleges aren’t student ready. At College Unbound, we make sure the curriculum is student focused and changes to meet the needs of the student.” ~ Adam Bush, Provost, College Unbound

“One of the most important parts of scalability is the infrastructure you have in place. The Graduate! Network was amazing in entering those conversations early.” ~ Adriana Contreras, Executive Director, San Antonio Education Partnership

“Employers can work with higher education institutions through tuition assistance.” ~ Jaime Fall, Director, Economic Opportunities Program, UpSkill America

Also, in late 2016 and early 2017 Graduate! Network program directors from across the country, with the leadership of Dr. Robert Johnson jointly identified barriers faced by adult learners and our colleagues who support them in going back to and through college. The result is the Graduate! Network Policy Agenda. Read the Agenda on our website.
Bringing Theory To Practice

Kimberly Lowe-Sawyer
Graduate! Philadelphia Comebacker & Board Member

Kimberly Lowe-Sawyer started her journey back to college with Graduate! Philadelphia and earned her undergraduate degree from Chestnut Hill College, one of Graduate! Philadelphia’s founding partner colleges. That accomplishment energized her aspirations and she went on to earn a master’s degree there. She is now an EdD Candidate at Holy Family University. Kimberly recently spoke on a panel on the “whole student” at the annual Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) conference. BTtoP was established in 2003 in partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Kim’s reflections on the conference are included below, and you can read her comments in full on BTtoP’s website.

As an African-American and first-generation college student, I found integrating into college life difficult. I felt unprepared for the new college culture. I entered college with experiences of social injustices and inequality.

The byproduct of those experiences caused me to have feelings of inferiority and doubts regarding my ability to flourish academically and socially. This sentiment is common for adult learners and minority students from low-income families. Studies support the notion that factors like these may have contributed to my apprehension to integrate [with my new college culture].

I recall a professor questioning my ability to succeed in my program because I was doing poorly in his statistics class. I could handle the defeat of a difficult subject; retakes occur in academia. However, the condescending comments towards struggling students like me became costlier than a decline in a GPA. It was a detriment to my overall well-being. I immediately withdrew from his course and contemplated leaving college altogether. Fortunately, there was another professor and fellow students who encouraged me to dispel my negative thoughts and to persevere. Years later, I am one paper away from completing my doctorate!

While attending this academic conference, I dialogued with experts on the topics of intersectionality, well-being, and civic engagement. As a nontraditional student, I strengthened my academic and emotional support system through networking. Research suggests that faculty members are leading influencers of student experiences and facilitators of institutional missions and visions, so it was meaningful to be in direct communication with participants to share the importance of faculty validation and the continuum of engagement with students inside and outside of the classroom.
Data That Move Us

Alongside coordinating learning and sharing activities and helping Graduate! communities organize and grow, one of the Graduate! Network’s central functions is to support data collection and analytics for our communities. The Comeback Tracker data helps us all understand Comebackers and the challenges they face, quantify the impact of advising services on progress toward re-enrollment and graduation and establish benchmarks, and identify predictive indicators and patterns to inform our collective work to increase college completion among adults. To ensure the validity of our findings, The Network has standardized collection and analysis protocols and measures of Comebacker progress, applying them to all Network communities as a service. When we pull together the data from all our communities, we have a dataset that crosses geographies, systems and institutions.

The data, continuously collected in Philadelphia since 2005, and progressively in other communities as they joined, has already informed our benchmarks and how we all serve Comebackers. For example, we have learned:

- Half of Comebackers who receive advising services re-enroll.

- Most of those who re-enroll do so within six months of starting to work with an advisor, yet there is a long “tail” of re-enrollment lasting two years.

- Seventy-nine percent of Comebackers who re-enroll graduate after five years or are still persisting as defined by consistent year-over-year enrollment.

- The five-year graduation benchmark was 43% (as of 2013). This data will soon be updated.

Considering that by their own estimates and historic data, without the Graduate! intervention these Comebackers would not have returned to college and not graduated, these are good outcomes.

In 2016 and 2017 the Network conducted a two-year project to develop a data management and analysis program that will carry us for the next few years. With input from Network communities and experts outside the Network we identified three main components:

- Build a robust process for confirming enrollment and graduation and implement the process twice a year, resulting in updated, verified data for communities;

- Design and test data analytics and predictive modeling tools, and;

- Provide the Network with new benchmarks for enrollment, persistence and graduation.
We wanted to include in the first data run of the project as many as possible of our 22 communities. To ensure results that are statistically significant for the predictive modelling, communities had to have at least 100 unique records representing Comebackers in a stage beyond initial inquiry. By June 2017 a total of 14 of the Network’s communities contributed 22,303 unique records. Here is what we found:

Who are Comebackers?

- The age distribution of Comebackers being served across the Network is fairly even, with slightly more Comebackers clustered in the 31 to 40-year old age range.

- More than half of all Comebackers served by Network communities are non-white, reflecting a diversity of communities served.

- Comebackers served have relatively low incomes: With slightly over two-thirds of Comebackers reporting on their incomes, slightly less than half of those reporting have a family income lower than $24,000 a year, another half have family incomes between $24,000 and $56,000. Only one out of ten of reporting Comebackers have a family income of more than $56,000 a year and none reported family incomes greater than $100,000 a year.

- Seventy-seven percent of Comebackers are employed, split nearly evenly between those employed part-time (fewer than 40 hours) and full-time (40 hours and up).

What kept Comebackers from returning to college before first connecting with you and your advisors and when do they see themselves re-enrolling?

- Finances (36%)

- Logistical challenges such as work schedule, transportation, childcare (27%)

- Lack of guidance - before they found Graduate! (20%)

Another 11% of Comebackers report that life challenges are still stopping them from returning to college at the current time. Academic or learning issues are holding back just 6% of Comebackers. Thirty percent of Comebackers reported that they have defaulted student loans or are unsure of their financial standing with their previous college or lender. This is up from less than 20% in 2010.

Fifty-three percent of Comebackers say they are going back to school for personal goals that are employment or career-oriented (better job, increased earning potential, career change); another 42% are motivated by more general personal goals. At intake, close to half (48%) of Comebackers say they are ready to start school right away, and more than one-third (36%) say they’ll be ready within 3-6 months. Fully 20% of Comebackers say their academic area of interest is “undecided” or “unknown.”
What leads to success?

Using a predictive analytics model, we found:

- Receiving more than 14 “high touch” interactions with an advisor and hearing about the program by way of a referral, a flyer, or another individual, increase four-fold the likelihood of a Comebacker re-enrolling. Television ads were the least predictive of enrollment.

- Stating a goal of immediate return to college, or readiness within 3-6 months, plus having some interactions with advisors (but fewer than 14) showed those Comebackers twice as likely to re-enroll.

- Not working nor looking for work, or working part-time or full-time up to 40 hours a week, also showed a predictive correlation with re-enrollment compared to being unemployed and looking for work or working more than 40 hours a week.

- Providing income information on the intake form was slightly more predictive of re-enrollment compared to not answering that particular question. There was a similar correlation with answering the question about defaulted loans, regardless of the answer (Yes/No/Unsure). Other questions that were left unanswered were not correlated with enrollment.

We will continue to update you on the findings as we roll them out early in 2018 and we will discuss them and how they can impact your program during the 2018 Solution Sessions.

To learn more about Data That Move Us, please contact us at info@graduate-network.org.

Community Spotlights

Upgrade, San Antonio Education Partnership

What motivational activity do you use to keep Comebackers on track?

“Early on, we noticed that there were a handful of individuals who had filled out the intake form but did not respond to emails or phone calls. After listening in on a Cross Country Conversation – The Graduate! Network’s monthly interactive webinar for Advisors – we designed our own catchy bright orange postcard that states: ‘Hello! Still thinking about going back to college?’”

Upper Cumberland TRC

How has being part of a statewide adult college completion initiative impacted the work that you do?

“Our impact on adult education is greater... we have a built-in support system, others we can call for best practices. We have a greater impact on workforce development. An article published in a Nashville paper affects the work done in the Upper Cumberland. Marketing is multiplied. The possibility for funding is multiplied. The effect is multiplied.”

Continue reading these stories and other spotlights on our news page.
Bridging The Talent Gap

How Employers Can Work With Comebackers

There are few relationships Graduate! Network Communities seek that are more important – and more difficult to bring about – than those with the employer community. Experience, however, has shown that the creation of robust partnerships with a broad range of community employers other than those already predisposed to support education – the education-friendly employers – requires substantial effort with frustratingly little to show.

Because of this frustration, we launched our Bridging The Talent Gap (BTTG) employer engagement project. The goal is to make explicit the needs, attitudes and actions of employers and employees regarding postsecondary attainment. Based on this data, Graduate! partners in each community can then develop activities with employers that are responsive to the findings.

Importantly, and unlike most employer studies, we understood the need for a foundation of information and insight on the smaller and mid-sized employers that are predominant in our communities. To date, BTTG has collected insights from more than 1,900 businesses in multiple Graduate! Network Communities across several states providing a comprehensive perspective of employers’ challenges in the hiring process and their perception of the role education plays in their business success.

For more information about these business insights, communities and states who have participated and other research findings, please explore the BTTG website and interactive data dashboards at www.BridgingTheTalentGap.org.

At LearnX17, Jeff Nally, founder of Nally Group, lent us his expertise from the Human Resource Manager’s perspective. He offered practical advice to Directors on how to use the BTTG data to talk to employers:

"The data around education supporting employers is the foot in the door for partnering with employers. Employers spend a lot of money acquiring mediocre employees when they could be upskilling their existing employees into those roles. Regionally specific data can be something to bring to employers to show them what roles need to be filled and what they can do to better fill them."

Additionally, Dr. Dan Ash, Co-Principal Investigator and Research Director for BTTG, presented new research comparing employers who provide financial support for their employees to pursue college versus employers who do not provide financial support for college. The data reveal that 56% of employers surveyed do provide tuition benefits. We selected this initial analysis because the financial support employers give is one of the most successful interventions in helping Comebackers who are working and learning persist and complete college credentials. (e.g., Tran & Smith, 2017)
4 Key Takeaways: from Dr. Dan Ash

1. Hiring is significantly easier for employers who provide college tuition benefits for their employees.

2. The labor pool accessed by employers who provide financial support for college coursework is significantly more skilled.

3. Despite popular myth, employers say that employees with college degrees (both bachelor’s and associate’s degrees) have more of the applied skills such as leadership, problem-solving and teamwork that employers need.

4. Many employers who provide financial support for college coursework are not currently partnering with local colleges to address skills gaps, but most (93%) are ready and willing to partner. This is an ideal space within which Graduate! Network Communities can broker a relationship that optimizes Comebackers’ chances for success.

The new research also reveals a great opportunity for Communities in two sectors: retail and manufacturing. 68% of manufacturing companies offer tuition benefits for their employees; conversely only 42% of retailers offer tuition benefits for their employees. However, the retail sector has a higher proportion of Comebackers among their workforce. 28.5% of retail sales associates are 25 year or older with some college but no degree compared to 21.3% in all other occupations. Jeff reflected on these sector-specific opportunities:

"Retail is a big opportunity for education partnerships. Retailers are creating relationship managers in their stores and there is an increased use of technology in retail. These two opportunities [in retail and manufacturing] are a reminder that industries and employers that we don’t think change that much, do change."

Across all organizations, we discovered, on average, only 51% of education benefits are used by employees. And when employers were asked why they thought their education benefits were not more fully utilized, the number one reason employers cited was “workers are too busy or committed otherwise.” In response, Jeff described the mindset that Graduate! Network Directors should use when talking through this common objection with employers:

“Tuition reimbursement can be confusing and sometimes will not align with semesters which can be a deterrent for employees to take the time to figure it out. Use a tuition reimbursement consultant mindset to help Comebackers better understand what is offered to them.”

As a Network, we encourage all Graduate! Communities who have not yet participated in Bridging The Talent Gap, to reach out to us so that together we can create a plan to reach more employers in your location!
The Other Student Debt Crisis

By David Scobey, Senior Scholar, The Graduate! Network

For most students, going to college means going into debt. As postsecondary education becomes more crucial than ever to middle-class opportunity, the majority of undergraduates have to borrow against their future in order to secure it. For those who do, the median burden is $17,000, but even smaller debt loads are unsustainable for many students. To continue reading, click the link below.


Inside Higher Ed is the free daily news website for people who work in higher education. Breaking news, lively commentary and thousands of job postings bring more than 1.2 million people to the site each month.

Tennessee Stories

Scaling Up and Out to Reach Adult Learners

In 2016 and 2017, The Graduate! Network was instrumental in the design and implementation of the Tennessee Reconnect Community Network and the first seven Tennessee Reconnect Communities (TRCs). The Tennessee Reconnect statewide initiative aims to help adults enter higher education to gain new skills, advance in the workplace, and fulfill lifelong dreams of completing a degree or credential.

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), the state’s higher education coordinating board tasked with implementing the Governor’s Drive to 55 agenda, was initially introduced to the Graduate! Network through Graduate Memphis, which was the third Graduate! adaptation, emphasizing local resources and voices. We are pleased to be part of the movement taking place in Tennessee.

Listen to Jessica Gibson, Assistant Executive Director, Adult Learner Initiatives, Tennessee Higher Education Commission talk about developing a statewide program for re-engaging adult learners.

To learn more about our work with Tennessee Reconnect Communities, visit graduate-network.org/communities-2/
Save the Date!

LEARNX18

Presented by The Graduate! Network

October 17 - 19, 2018

Kansas City, MO

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